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A Rebel Spirit
or
The Pre-Raphaelite Movement in the
Nineteenth Century

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Preface

As an account of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement of the ninteenth century, this paper comprises two aims. It undertakes, on the one hand, to reveal a unique movement for what it actually was, an attempt to combine the media of painting and literature. It attempts, on the other, to illustrate this union by examining the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti whose painting and poetry best show the direction which the movement took for over three decades.

During the search for some understanding of the movement's aim, however, certain factors underlying its development emerged. The movement's origin, for instance, as a reaction against conventional English art in the tradition of Raphael, the aesthetic principles that grew out of this reaction, the movement's relation to Victorian society--all became important aspects of the total picture and worthy of discussion.

As for the discussion of Rossetti's work, concentration is primarily on the degree to which he combined a single them, mood,or idea in eight specific poems and paintings, rather than on the technical quality he reveals either as poet or painter. Occasionally, technical judgment is attempted where a lay opinion seemsappropriate and valid. And occasionally, references are made to works by other members of the movement, either to clarify a point or to illustrate a union of media. But the nature of the movement and examples of Rossetti's work are the main concern of this paper.

A Rebel Spirit

The spirit of Pre-Raphaelite thought "touched commonplace men and made them, momentarily, into geniuses."[1] Such a spirit, by fact of its driving influence upon a small group of nineteenth century English artists, forecasts a magical power. In part romantic, in part a love of the past and unadorned Nature, this spirit at once linked itself with "Romantic poetry, with the Gothic and religious revival, with the reaction against the Industrial Revolution."[2] But, above these ties in significance, was the battle for the union of two media, painting and literature, it waged in the realm of aesthetics. Its struggle and the part it played in the lives of a few men are important clues to the essential meaning of the term "Pre-Raphaelite" which became the spirit's emblem. Thus, it is the story behind this spirit that this paper attempts to unfold.

The Pre-Raphaelite story really begins in England, early in the year 1848. At that time, the spirit lay dormant in a folio of Lasinio engravings[3] where it waited to reveal itself in the truth, beauty, and simplicity of fourteenth century Italian art. One evening, John Everett Millais, recognized precocious "child" of the English Academy drawing school, an epithet coined during his earlier association with the school as a prodigy, borrowed the Lasinio volume and assembled his friends to share with them the magic of the Italian frescoes. Among the enthusiastic company was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a forceful Italianate-Englishman whose magnetic charm stood in sharp contrast to the patience of William Holman Hunt, the artist standing beside him. Yet both were fired

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1William Gaunt, The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy, p. 69.
2Ibid., p. 25.
3Ibid., p. 24.

by the spirit of this folio--a folio which continued to attract others until William Michael Rossetti was recruited, as were F. G. Stephens, James Collinson, painter, and Thomas Woolner, sculptor. From this folio an ideal developed; these seven artists dedicated their talents; and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was born. The ideal was, essentially, to strike out for a new line in art, namely: "Go to nature in all singleness of heart, selecting nothing, rejecting nothing."[4] As brushes were poised and canvases cleaned, a stage was set. The folio had, with the lamp-like magic of Aladdin, transformed artists into disciples of Nature.

But opposition was not long in forthcoming. The Royal Academy, organized center of English art, had enjoyed for over a century undisputed dictatorship in matters concerning the principle of art and the manner of execution. Englishmen becomepainters by industry: this was the principle. Paintings must be grand, florid, dusky, Raphaelish: this was the manner.[5] It was from this conventionality that the Brotherhood was seeking deliverance. Their feeling was that art at the Academy under the presidency of Joshua Reynolds had deteriated into mere stilted, mechanical imitation of the great Raphael. Raphael had possessed a gift, the "power to prove that the human figure was of nobler proportion, that it had grander capabilities of actions than seen by the casual eye, and that for large work expression must mainly depend upon movement of the body."[6] But his followers tended to accentuate his poses into postures, to achieve ridiculous caricatures and turns of heads and limbs so that figures were drawn in patterns and placed like "pieces on a chessboard in the foreground." This tradition, exercised religiously by Reynolds and his school, had, according to the Brotherhood, stifled the "breath

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4Ibid., p. 17.

5Ibid., p. 13.

6Holman Hunt, Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, p. 136.

of design"[7] and destroyed imagination in art. Only before Raphael had there been sincerity and truth in painting as found in the Lasioio folio, because after him all "painters tried to be little Raphaels."[8] For this reason, the Brotherhood chose the name "Pre-Raphaelite" to represent their new ideal in art. As Hunt later explained, the name was meant to "keep in our minds our determination ever to do battle against the frivolous art of the day, which had for its ambition 'Monkeyana' ideas, 'Books of Beauty,' and 'Chorister Boys,' whose forms were those of melted wax with drapery of no tangible texture."[9] Yet, the Brotherhood held that art could be made alive again by demanding that pictures tell stories built up by direct application to Nature for each detail, for each feature, however humble a part of foreground or background this might be.[10]

With revitalization of art their cause, then, and a union of painting and literature their new aim the Brotherhood launched their program. The project of book illustration was chosen for the narrative potential it offered and Shakespearean sources were seized upon. Millais immediately began work on the "Death of Ophelia," his model lying hour after hour in a cold pool for the sake of authentic botanical detail. Hunt likewise settled himself beneath the fig tree in the garden of Mr. Stephen's father[11] where he studied the texture of its foliage and painted it as it was--leaf, spot, and vein.

The Academy, however, accustomed to unquestioned authority, smarted under the affront of the Brotherhood and answered in ruinous terms. The Pre-Raphaelites were hounded, denounced as amateurs, disturbers, rebel

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7Ibid., p. 137.
8Frances Winwar, Poor Splendid Wings, p. 6.
9Hunt, op. cit., p. 142.
10D. S. R. Welland, The Pre-Raphaelites in Literature and Art, p. 16.
11Op. cit., p. 112.

"art naturalists," and their canvases, evidences of untold labor for exactness of detail, called "simple" by the Academicians. The Brotherhood consequently withdrew, somewhat disconcerted and a little stunned. But the Pre-Raphaelites were knights of a new order and not without a champion. John Ruskin, the embodiment of English criticism, came to their rescue. He was, in romantic terms:

> ...the thing incarnate, fulfilling perfectly the true formula of the reformer; a dreamer; a mixture of past and present, real and unreal; a bundle of contradictions with somewhere a coherent scheme of life red hot in the gaseous nebula of his ideas.[12]

A Pre-Raphaelite by temperament, enamored of nature, he expressed a certain sympathy for the Brotherhood's new aim and, in an epic book on art, withstood the Academy's criticism of the group's fussy detail and "piece by piece approach" to a picture.[13] This position taken in Modern Painters proved more than favorable to the Brotherhood as it, too, represented an abandonment of old creeds--not that fidelity to nature was a new cause, but rather a renascent one, new only in contrast with the staidness of Reynold's rules. It was true, Ruskin wrote:

> ...that detail of this kind has long been so carelessly rendered, that the perfect finishing of it becomes a matter of curiosity.... Yet nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distasteful excitement.[14]

Such unexpected sanction from the great Ruskin temporarily bore the Pre-Raphaelites above the crisis. They themselves attempted to write in defense of their new ideal. F. G. Stephens who, except for William Michael Rossetti, was the chief mouthpiece of the Pre-Raphaelite group,

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12Gaunt, op. cit., p. 33.
13Welland, op. cit., p. 37.
14Ibid.

simply pointed out their aim to:

> ...encourage and enforce adherence to simplicity of nature. By a determination to represent the thing and the whole of the thing, by training himself to the deepest observation of its fact and detail, enabling himself to reproduce, as far as possible, Nature herself, the painter will best evince his share of faith .... The artist should be content to study nature alone and not dream of elevating any of her works.[15]

A conference later convinced the band that they needed a channelled attack, perhaps a magazine, published and financed by them, where the union of the arts could begin and their aesthetic principles be clarified. The Germ was thus born in 1850 and in its preface their aim stated: "to obtain the thoughts of artists, upon Nature as evolved in Art, in another language besides their own proper one."[16] Yet, its abandonment after only a fourth issue, partly because of financial difficulties and partly because of an absence of enthusiasm among the members, was premonition enough that the Brotherhood, as an organization, lacked the one thing which would have held it together--a well-defined code embodying their aesthetic concept.

Thus, with no other bond than idealistic, revolutionary temperaments too soon cooled, the Brotherhood could not last. This disintegrating threat was, in a sense, present from the very beginning. Hunt, for one, was very early dissatisfied with the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites and set out to reform them and the world through religious art. Art was to him both religion and love because "all art from the beginning served for the higher development of men's minds." It should "illustrate themes connected with the sublime, honest, laudable, pathetic interests of humanity."[18] "Painting must not only be true to nature, but so assembled

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15Ibid., from F. G. Stephen's "The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art," pp. 45-48.

16Welland, op. cit., p. 20.

17Winwar, op. cit., pp. 21, 39.

18Welland, op. cit., p. 65. (Hunt quotations)

as to preach purity of life and Christianity together."[19] But this moral principle of art aroused no feeling of kinship among the other members. Unable, however, to follow any other, Hunt eventually departed for Jerusalem to paint The Scapegoat,* a canvas which voiced all the misery and toil of man as felt in his own heart. Millais, too, filled with dreams of fame since childhood, soon forsook the Pre-Raphaelite path, gradually reverted to Reynold's rules, and after forty-five years of painting what the public demanded, became president of the Royal Academy in 1895. "From Pre-Raphaelitism he might have taken the abiding harm of independence. He might have been poor and struggling."[20] He might have painted from his heart. "Instead he gave the world what it wanted and the world fulfilled its part of the bargain."[21] As for Rossetti? His mind was in retrospect five hundred years, escaping under the wing of Dante from reality to the mystical world of fourteenth century love and art, where Nature as a pattern was lost in allegory and symbolism. Ruskin fumed and pronounced the "Pre-Raphaelite cause doubly betrayed by the mistimed deliberation of one of its members and the inefficient haste of another...."[22] As for Millais, he was guilty of the grossest betrayal by yielding to popular taste.

What was wrong? Where was the Pre-Raphaelite spirit of truth and sincerity and simplicity in art? Had it completely vanished during the entanglement with the Academy?

Basically the spirit still existed, but in a new form, more liberal, more expressive of the Pre-Raphaelite individual. "Henceforth

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19Gaunt, op. cit., p. 51.
20Gaunt, op. cit., p. 236.
21Ibid.
22Winwar, op. cit., pp. 177-78.

*Refer to prints, p. I.

Pre-Raphaelitism no longer implied sincerity and truth of portrayal of what the artist's eye perceived, but a certain doleful dreaminess, artificially induced, as a protest against reality"[23] in art. The members still maintained individually the dream of combining the arts, still painted and wrote with revitalization of art in mind. Only their banner was changed to represent escape from their immediate world rather than reproduction of Nature.

To understand the new escapist form of Pre-Raphaelite spirit, one must be able to reconstruct the real world of the Brotherhood, to conceive it as one in which the most significant element was change. The Industrial Revolution had dawned in Victorian England, bringing with it the beneficent aspects of mechanization, better production, and increased output. A "whole new world" of middle, industrial classes, capital, and labor had sprung into importance while ideas in science, commerce, religion, education, and government had embraced bourgeois values.[24] The face of England was transformed. Economically, coal was replacing forest and a stream as source of power, the factory system the old apprenticeships of village and town. Socially, the curse of England was the crude, vulgar pushing of the new middle class. In the realm of aesthetics, painters and sculptors were making fortunes, conventional ones that is, not the Pre-Raphaelites; for, never before had there been such wealth--never before had men been able to buy and enjoy works of art on such a lavish scale. Yet, with the progress and flourish of art, along came poverty, widespread unemployment, and crowded industrial centers filled with Blake's "dark, Satanic mills." The Chartists' cries for universal manhood suffrage rose above the din of machines. Millais and Hunt's

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23 Ibid., p. 267.
24 C. G. Osgood, The Voice of England, p. 455.

excursions led them in the midst of the working classes crowding the streets,[25] and these two began to question how things had come to this. As they looked about them, there seemed little beauty or romance, but much ugliness and strife. Life at best was a kind of existence "starved for beauty but leaving plenty of room for material gains six days a week."[26] This blatant materialism of the age with its squalor, misery, and unrest, stunned the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly their romantic spirit. Happiness for them could result only if they transcended this grubbiness, lived a life of the imagination, and nourished their beings in a lost world, more beautiful than the real, of knights and ladies, chivalry and armor.[27]

Thus, the reason for their changing spirit becomes apparent. At one instant dedicating themselves to Nature, at the next escaping it in a self-fabricated dream world, the "Pre-Raphaelites had no single enthusiasm,"[28] but many. Caught between their idea of what the world should be and the picture of the world as it was, they jumbled together the material and the spiritual, beauty and factual observation[29] so that the result was a mixture of values in which the only stable form of their spirit was a defiance of materialism. They liked anything that had nothing to do with life and acknowledged reality only when it occasionally touched their spirit, whereupon they quickly assimilated it into their own private world.

An instance of this assimilation occurred soon after the disintegration of the Brotherhood. One of the earliest aesthetic principles of the Pre-Raphaelites held that everyone was, in his own way, an artist.[30]

25Hunt, op. cit., pp. 101-102.
26Osgood, op. cit., p. 459.
27Winwar, op. cit., p. 92.
28Gaunt, op. cit., p. 247.
29Welland, op. cit., p. 42.
30Gaunt, op. cit., p. 238.

Art was for every individual, and the aim was to inspire and encourage sparks of interest or talent whenever they appeared. Of this principle Rossetti was a particular disciple. The disbanding of the Brotherhood consequently led him to seek new friends in art; and at Oxford, he discovered the team of "Ned" and "Topsy" which, united with Rossetti, became the nucleus of a new Pre-Raphaelite group. Burne-Jones, painter, and William Morris, architect, had previously met Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites indirectly through Ruskin's Edinburgh Lectures. Both possessed the Pre-Raphaelite temperament. "Dissatisfaction with the drabness and dirt of Victorian England made Morris a Pre-Raphaelite."[31] Like Rossetti, he shared a romantic love for Arthurian legend; and they, together, implanted in the receptive mind of Burne-Jones a corresponding love that "put forward each year a new shoot in his paintings, adding steadly a Tristram and Yseult, a Morgan le Fay, a beguiling Merlin, and a Holy Grail to the list of his canvases."[32] Again there was united rebellion amond the Pre-Raphaelites, this time against the whole society. The rebel spirit was now a cry for the beautiful life as found in Morris's "The Earthly Paradise":

> Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
> Forget the snorting steam and the piston stroke,
> Forget the spreading of the hideous town,
> Think rather of the packhouse on the down,
> And dream of London, small, white, and clean,
> The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.[33]

Morris's link with PreRaphaelitism was significant, too, in that it led to a restatement of the conflict between Pre-Raphaelite spirit and Victorian society. Against the material form the world now exhibited, Morris voiced his rage in an essay, "The Aims of Art." Regretting the

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31Welland, op. cit., p. 42.
32Gaunt, op. cit., p. 196.
33Welland, op. cit., p.22.

decline of art because of the growth of industry, he there slashed out at the bourgeois taste of his time. In the Middle Ages the craftsman had been free to work. What he fabricated being of little value, he could toy with it, he could waste hours amusing himself, he could make his creations beautiful. Such art "gave pleasure, made a man's work happy and his rest fruitful." But now the picture was different. The ideal of society was speed, not craftsmanship. If a man wished to ornament and knew that a machine could not do it properly, and if he did not care to spend the time or toil to do it properly himself, why should he do it at all? Morris further maintained that man was now the slave of a capitalist system for whose existence the invention of machinery was necessary. Even if a man worked and in working produced what should be art, it was but slavery, a kind of utilitarianism with the craftsman working to live so that he might live to work.[34] Such a system was wrong. It clashed with his type of Pre-Raphaelite socialism that recognized everyone as a potential artist. It defied his fundamental premise that "art is the expression of pleasure in labor and happiness the end of life."[35] The idea that civilization was wrong haunted him. As a result, he formed a company which produced the famous Kelmscott Books, ornaments, and furnishings of rare beauty and workmanship designed to improve English taste, to restore a love for the art of craftsmanship displaced by utilitarianism. And because he did not wish "to see life as it was," he, like Rossetti, turned to romantic poetry and lost himself in his own poetic world of the medieval, of his "Sir Peter Harpden's End," "King Arthur's Tomb," and "The Life and Death of Jason."

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34 Ibid., pp. 62-65 (paraphrased from William Morris's "The Aims of Art").

35 Gaunt, op. cit., p. 191.

If this defiance of Victorian materialism was the one stable form of Pre-Raphaelite spirit, the attempt to combine art and literature remained its one consistent aim. From this springs the magical element; for, the Pre-Raphaelites offer uniquely in English literature, except for Blake, the opportunity to study artists engaged in expressing in two media a single theme, mood, or sentiment.

From the beginning, the canvases of Hunt or Millais, painters only, were reworked in sonnet form by Rossetti. Later, the poems of Morris were seized for illustration by Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Millais. And even if not re-expressed in verse, Pre-Raphaelite paintings achieved narration by virtue of their story element. Hunt's The Awakened Conscience affords a typical example. Without aid of story it visualizes a maiden's repentance of her fall from virtue into prostitution. The artist's own comment about the picture's conception gives insight into the Pre-Raphaelite procedure:

> In scribbles I arranged the two figures to present the woman recalling the memory of her childish home, and breaking away from her gilded cage with a startled holy resolve, while her shallow companion still sings on, ignorantly intensifying her repentent purpose.[36]

Because his art, too, must imply some moral, Hunt realized it through the use of inventions. Thus, the cruelty of this human situation became a cat playing beneath the table with a maimed and dying bird and the eventual discarding of the mistress by her seducer a discarded glove.[37] To Ruskin the picture was perfect in its literary suggestiveness and Pre-Raphaelite devotion to detail. "There is not a single object in all that room," he wrote, "common, modern, vulgar, but it becomes tragical, if rightly read....

36Welland, op. cit., p. 26.
37Ibid.

Nay the very hem of the poor girl's dress, at which the painter had labored so closely, thread by thread, has a story in it, if we think how soon its pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her outcast feet failing in the street."[38]

The Pre-Raphaelite aim consequently had its heroes--Hunt who painted literarily to moralize, Morris who rhymed pictorially. But Dante Gabriel Rossetti was the dual genius. He was both poet and painter, possessing at once the ability to describe in "pictorial terms"[39] the identical passions stroked on his canvases and arrayed with line, balance, and color. To study Rossetti's work reveals his gift to transfer unconsciously to one medium the expression he would have used in another. Thus, his very nature made him, above all the others, best qualified to realize the Pre-Raphaelite aim.

Whether he was, in essence, one more than the other becomes an interesting poing of debate in the examining of his series of "Sonnets for Pictures" that follows later. At present, perhaps his own reflection upon his dual talent is revealing enough. In a letter to Dr. Hake, his medical advisor, in 1870, as though attempting to distinguish himself between the quality of each and to clarify within his own mind the extent to which his artistic and poetic powers were interdependent, he wrote:

> My own belief is that I am primarily a poet (within the limits of my powers) and that it is my poetic tendencies that chiefly give value to my pictures; only painting being--what poetry is not--a livelihood--I have put my poetry chiefly in that form. On the other hand, the bread and cheese question has led to a good deal of my painting being potboiling and no more--whereas my verse, being unprofitable, has remained unprostituted.[40]

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38 Ibid., p. 27.
39 Ibid., p. 33.
40 Gaunt, op. cit. p. 118.

The discernment which he shows in weighing the artistic conflict within him suggests how wrong it would be to place him exclusively in one medium or the other. In fact, his success as a Pre-Raphaelite lay bound up in this unusual duality. As for Rossetti's aim as a creator, the same holds true.

Perhaps the best way to begin would be to make some general comment about the characteristics of Rossetti's work and then study his particular poems and paintings in more detail. Essentially, his aim as poet and painter was a matter of projecting the ideal, verbalizing and picturing the unknown, and embodying the mystical. In this respect his aim governed the components of his art and literature. How was this true? If the whole of his pictures were assembled together, they would emerge as just so many studies of woman. There was a valid reason for this. In Rossetti's world, "woman was the center, the essence of that life of the emotions which made art possible as it made all living tolerable."[41] Visible in the physical loveliness of a woman's eyes, lips, hair, and breast was an "occult presentation of the divine parts and attributes so that she became the incarnation of beauty, of love, of the supreme God."[42] Because of this mystical concept, there existed at the center of his life his own "Dream Women": first, the inscrutable Elizabeth Siddal, a shopkeeper's daughter, whose beauty ever inspired Rossetti; and later, the palefaced Jane Burden, about whom there hung "a fascination, making of her girlish innocence the snare of a belle dame sans merci."[43] In Rossetti's eyes, these two, whom he familiarly called "stunners," were of both heaven and earth, one an incarnation of love, the other of mystery and aloofness. To him their

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41Ibid., p. 42.
42P. F. Baum, The House of Life, p. 24-25.
43Winwar, op. cit. p. 146.

physical beauty was the key to ideal beauty, for in expressing what his eyes could see, dazed and inspired, he glimpsed the ideal form.

Nowhere does this mystical, platonic concept of beauty as "flesh and spirit" in one emerge more clearly than in Rossetti's sonnets in the House of Life. There he wrote in exultation those lines about the brooding Elizabeth:

> Beauty like hers is genius. Not the call
> Of Homer's or Dante's heart sublime,--
> Not Michael's hand furrowing the zones of time,--
> Is more with compassed mysteries musical;
> Nay, not in Spring's or Summer's sweet footfall
> More gathered fits exuberant Life bequeaths
> Than doth this sovereign face, whose love-
> spell breathes
> Even from its shadowed contour on the wall.
> "Genius in Beauty"

There, again speaking of Elizabeth, he eulogized Love in "Heart's Hope" as a state in which "Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor/ Thee from myself, neither our love from God"--a passion in which the physical, spiritual, and divine were so mingled as to defy separation one from the other. There, he doted upon the body's delights in "Love-Sweetness," catalogued the physical attractions of his lady, only suddenly to interpolate:

> What sweeter than these things, except the thing
> In lacking which all these would lose their
> sweet:--
> The confident heart's still fervour...

Often, the sensuous quality in his sonnets and the attention to large arms, bare throats, and full lips in his paintings belie the degree to which Rossetti valued the invisible and spiritual he always sought to express. But even in what seemed preoccupation with the world of the senses, he still painted eyes that looked beyond to eternity, like those in Astarte Syriaca; he still wrote of spiritual beauty as genius and of

woman as its ideal illumination--a concept that formed the transcendental basis of all his creations.[44]

Influenced, too, by this transcendental quality was Rossetti's choice of material. In selecting frameworks satisfactory to his aim of idealizing woman, he shut his eyes to life and allowed his fancy to fly back to a period when darkness and mystery reigned, back to the medieval worlds of Dante and Arthurian legend. Cloaked in symbolism and allegory, they furnished him with literary sources both poetic and semi-mystical in type.[45] Thus, just as Rossetti's ideal was woman, so was his ideal source Dante's sonnet sequence, the Vita Nuova, which he had early translated at the age of seventeen.[46] In fact, the enduring worship of this great Italian underlying many of Rossetti's paintings was a very real element in his courtship of Elizabeth. Their relationship threatened a re-incarnation of that of Dante and Beatrice; for, the "Rossettis carried Dante with them like a totem. He was to them what Shakespeare is to the Englishman, an ancestral god, an inheritance, a national glory."[47] This literary inspiration is so evident in the titles of Rossetti's paintings, The Salutation of Beatrice: the Meeting in Florence, Dante's Dream, Beata Beatrix, Dante Drawing the Angel; so prominent in his attempt to write prose allegories like the "Hand and Soul" or mystical poems like "The Blessed Damozel"; so responsible for the bit by bit depiction of banners, beds, vessel, hangings earmarking his pictures, that his works reached the Pre-Raphaelite aim of being stories within themselves.

44Baum, op. cit., p. 26.
45F. M. Hueffer, Rossetti, p. 72.
46Elizabeth Cary, Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, vol. I, p. 84.
47Gaunt, op. cit., p. 43.

Besides revealing a literary quality, Rossetti's paintings were filled with symbolism. Signs, doves, and nimbuses invade The Girlhood of Mary Virgin; symbolic animals Found and Beata Beatrix; concrete sensuality the famous Lady Lilith--all results of his characteristic tendency to imply the invisible by means of the visible. To the degree, then, that Rossetti's pictorial conceptions are exclusively literary, he might be considered more poet than painter; for, "he painted 'sentiments' and sentiment is the property of literature."[48]

To assert that the literary quality of Rossetti's work renders him more likely a poet than painter recalls the fundamental aim of the Pre-Raphaelites. Yet study of his "Series of Sonnets for Pictures" shows that his work represented a union of poetry and painting. As Elizabeth Cary points out in the introduction to her two-volumed edition of Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

> To feel to the full the passionate romanticism of Rossetti's Italian and medieval temper, and to appreciate the noble flashes of moral insight by which his mental attitude is illumined, it is necessary to study his poems and pictures side by side.[49]

In view of this statement, eight pairs of poems and pictures are chosen here for study with the aim of seeing in them Rossetti's method.

Between the years 1849 to 1852, Rossetti, as an associate of Hunt, worked with sacred themes and produced two pictures which, with a companion sonnet, stand as his first attempt to combine art and poetry. Both paintings, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and the Ecce Ancilla Domani, are studies of the Virgin Maiden although they differ in story element. The first depicts a domestic scene with the young virgin and Saint Anna seated

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48Lucien Pissarro, Rossetti, p. 12.
49p.v.

before an embroidery frame. The Madonna is shown in momentary neglect of her work as she stares at a small angel bearing a white lily, while outside on a terrace, Saint Joachim, patient and unaware, prunes a vine. Immediately arresting are the symbolic accessories filling this picture and explained in Rossetti's poem, "Mary's Girlhood." A holy Dove "abides without" on the trellis; palm leaves lie in the form of a cross on the floor; a white lily "which is Innocence being interpreted," rests upon six bound, heavy volumes representing "those virtues wherein the soul is rich"; and an embroidery stands unfinished in the center of which is a Tripoint:

> ...Perfect each
> Except the second of its points, to teach
> That Christ is not yet born.

Arresting, too, is the quality of awe-like silence and perfect calm reflected in the Virgin's face--a quality likewise fused into those simple lines of the sonnet:

> This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
> God's Virgin....
> An angel-watered lily, that near God
> Grows and is quiet.

Ending the first sonnet of the "Mary's Girlhood" of 1848 are also the lines:

> So held she through her girlhood;
> ...Till, one dawn at home
> She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
> At all,--yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed:
> Because the fulness of the time was come.

Not until the year 1850 did this poeticized moment receive pictorial expression and, in the appearance of Rossetti's Ecce Ancilla Domina,* likewise come into the "fulness of its time." The second of his "Early Christian" paintings, the picture delineates Mary, clad in white, sitting

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*Also called The Annunciation; refer to prints, p. II.

on a bed, as suggested in the poem. An angel with floating rainment towers over the figure, extending a lily stem toward her. And in the background, whitened walls blend harmoniously with the whitened figures, creating what Ford Madox Hueffer calls Rossetti's "Symphony in Whites."[50] As a matter of fact, contrast in the painting is present only in the red of the embroidery stand and blue of a corner screen--contrast, however, that renders the picture's whitened planes and "chaste" quality more impressive. Yet Hueffer states that the real value of the picture as a work of art lies in its "catching not of the religious, but of the human, emotions of the Virgin--of a young girl confronted by one of the great moments of life."[51] Fundamentally, there is present in the maiden's face a "fear" absent in that of the lyric. At the same time her taut body and brooding eyes, staring transfixedly at the lily representing purity, create an effect of stiffness and a certain "flatness" and "restraint both in color and drawing."[52]

Thus, in a sense, this first series reveals two things: one, Rossetti's early technical problems as a painter; and two, his rare talent for expressing in two media a similar mood without loss of intensity.

In the years that followed, however, from 1853 to 1862, perhaps his richest, Rossetti abandoned Hunt's Christian art and turned to water color. This change was significant. "The drawings of this period show, for the most part, a delicate enchantment and splendour of color that are very lovable."[53] Most typical are the Mary Magdalene, Dante Drawing the Angel, The Marriage of Saint George, The Blue Closet, and the Hesterna Rosa--

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50Op. cit., p. 34.
51Ibid., p. 36.
52Pissarro, op. cit., p. 27.
53Evelyn Waugh, Rossetti, p. 95.

drawings unaccompanied by poems. Rossetti began at that time, however, his one excellent draft with a modern theme, Found, which he never completed. Similar to Hunt's The Awakened Conscience, it pictures a lover finding his former sweetheart as a prostitute in the city streets while on his way to market with a calf bound in his cart. For this drawing, which his friends humorously called "Gariel's calf picture,"[54] Rossetti wrote much later, in 1881, a companion sonnet "Found." The theme of prostitution or fall from virtue embodied in both picture and sonnet is typically Victorian, the same of his 1847 poem, "Jenny." As Rossetti's solitary representation of modern life, Hueffer calls this an "interesting document on the Victorian spirit of the period"--one revealing that Rossetti was not dead to the problems of his age.[55] It is of interest here as a picture-poem duet revealing Rossetti's fusing process.

This fusion is most apparent in the melancholy tone and unchecked emotion that penetrate both the drawing and sonnet. The melancholy atmosphere arises from Rossetti's artistic treatment of setting. In the distance, as he illustrates in the painting and states in the sonnet:

> ... lamps across the bridge turn pale
> In London's smokeless resurrection-light,
> Dark breaks to dawn....

Against this transitional scene from "midnight to morrow," Rossetti has sketched a farmer struggling with a richly clad woman whose averted face is filled with passion now turned to hate. Reinforcing this whole theme of womanly virtue betrayed in sin is a calf imprisoned in the background, a victim to be sold just as the woman has sold her love and trust for wealth and luxury. Yet, some twenty years later, Rossetti successfully

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54Cary, op. cit., p. 159.
55Hueffer, op. cit., pp. 60-61.

recaptured the emotional impact and meaning of this struggle in his sonnet by the same name. There, the farmer's unbelieving eyes and taut facial muscles are poetically interpreted in lines like:

> ... O, God, today
> He only knows he holds her....

while the relentless hate of the woman's locked heart spills out in the phrase: "Leave me--I do not know you--go away." Such is the fidelity of situation and emotion in both painting and poem in this instance.

But in 1866, Rossetti again started anew. Tired of what he called "Dream-Painting," he began working with women's portraits or large single figures on backgrounds of rich accessories.[56] The results of this change were "definitely Venetian," the painting becoming heavy, sumptous, assured in its own way, the color rich and harmonious. It was during this period, too, that Rossetti's union of painting and poetry reached its height; for, he was "accomplished if ever."[57] Working continually, inspired by the flamboyant beauty of his models, Jane Burden and Alexa Wilding, he produced five notable poem-picture series worthy of study here: Beata Beatrix, Lady Lilith, Astarte Syriaca, Proserpine, and The Blessed Damozel.

Of these, the painting, Beata Beatrix* of 1863 has been called, according to Evelyn Waugh in his book Rossetti, one of the "greatest creations of all times," and the most purely spiritual and devotional work of European art since the fall of the Byzantine Empire."[58] Although these statements reflect opinions held by few art critics, the picture is recognized as one of Rossetti's best and most widely known with the exception of The Blessed Damozel. As the last product of his fascination with

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56Pissarro, op. cit., p. 53.
57Ibid., p. 136.
58p. 53.
*Refer to prints, p. III.

Dante's Vita Nuova, it stands as a final tribute to his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, as she filled his dreams. Painting in sombre tones of gold, green, and purple, Rossetti symbolically portrays the death of Beatrice in the semblance of a trance. The etherealized figure of a woman, seated on a balcony overlooking the city, occupies the foreground of the work. A crimson bird, the messenger of death, is dropping a poppy in her hands, relaxed and motionless as are the closed eyelids of a face uplifted in consciousness of a new world, transcendental and spiritual. In the misty background the figures of Dante and Love pass through a desolate street, aware of the event.

> Into the dimly aureoled head of Beatrice, Rossetti has painted all that was most tender and most devout in his memory of his wife. No model sat for him. From his most intimate memories and the innumerable sketches that had strewn the studio at Chatham Place he built up painfully and reverently the disembodied vision of his early love. It was a worthy memorial, the swan song of his own delicacy and depth of feeling.[59]

Such was Waugh's comment; and Hueffer, too, called it a "lyric--the setting in paint of a mood, and expression, made for himself, of his own personality in the mood of thinking of one dead."[60] The picture's composition and revelation of an absorption into the divine does make it an appropriate crypt wherein Elizabeth's face "is made her shrine." It moves as no other of Rossetti's paintings.

So akin in spirit and feeling is Rossetti's sonnet, "The Portrait," that the tendency has been to set it beside the picture as a companion piece. There, in rhapsodic lines, he prays:

> O Love, Let this my Lady's picture glow
> Under my hand to praise her name, and show

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59 Ibid., p. 132.
60 Op. cit., p. 129-30.

Even of her inner self the perfect whole:
That he who seeks her beauty's furthest goal,
Beyond the light that the sweet glances throw
And refluent wave of the sweet smile, may know
The very sky and sea-line of her soul.

Thus, the reason for the picture's moving quality might be found in the body of the sonnet quoted above, namely--this was love's gift to him--that he alone could immortalize her memory.

Rossetti completely reversed his theme in the years that followed from 1864 to 1868. At that time he painted the embodiment of carnal loveliness, Lady Lilith, and wrote a corresponding sonnet,"Body's Beauty," treating of "Adam's first wife, Lilith--the witch he loved before the gift of Eve." Both picture and sonnet are built around Goethe's legendary golden beauty, who with her "rose and poppy" allurement captivated the youthful Adam, enmeshed him in a net of self-love and adoration, and:

...left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

Unlike the Lilith that figures in the poem, however, Rossetti's portrait shows the enlargement of a gifted artist. It pictures not a woman immortalized in the act of ensnaring an Adam, but one splendidly and voluptuously formed, reclining in a modern boudoir, "subtly of herself contemplative," a mirror in one hand, a comb in the other. The picture's physical suggestiveness is brought out in well chosen details. Bunched roses spill forth their fragrance in the background. A burnished sconce complements the ornate couch over which Lilith's gown ripples and swirls. Amidst such splendor:

... she sits, young while the earth is old,
...And draws men to watch the bright web she
can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

These lines suggest at once how bewitching her charm, at the same time

how deadly. Amorous and cruel, beautiful and repulsive, passionate and cold, she symbolizes the perfect physical woman of all time, casting forth her power in Rossetti's union of poetry and paint.

To the year 1877 belong the painting Astarte Syriaca and a sonnet by the same name--Rossetti's clearest expressions of his absorption in later years with the worship of mystery cults. The key to this fusion, perhaps his most felicitous, is the poem itself; for contained therein are the subject, aim, and description of the pictorial mate. The very opening lines of the sonnet reveal the theme and aim as one of:

> Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon
> Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
> Ere Aphrodite was....

Thus, it is as the symbol of mysterious beauty and a worship of beauty that the magnificent woman of the painting stands, splendidly arrayed:

> ...In silver sheen
> Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
> Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune:
> And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean
> Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
> The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.

Heightening this atmosphere are the background figures of two attendant worshippers, red-haired, clothed in sea green, "torch bearing," compelling:

> ...All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea
> The witnesses of Beauty's face to be--

although haunting, unformulated aspirations cloud their own features. The face of the Goddess itself is compelling:

> That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell
> Amulet, talisman, and oracle,--
> Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery.

Perhaps the best expression of the effect achieved by this union of painting and poetry is Waugh's comment:

> This is one of the happiest examples of harmony between Rossetti's painting and poetry. There

> is a feeling about the picture as though a curtain had just been drawn revealing it, as though Astarte had been standing just a little longer than she had expected behind the arras --a laxness in the pose, a strain in the eyes --and there is in the opening of the sonnet-- "Mystery: lo!"--exactly the same feeling, the swish of the silk and the crash of the cymbal as the goddess is revealed; a sense of age ere Aphrodite was," the "absolute eyes" expressing the very abstraction of which we have just been speaking.[61]

Astarte Syriaca or Lady Lilith! Both sets, paintings and poems, are essentially different expressions of the same entity, a Goddess of Love --one completely sensual, the other completely pagan.

In the year 1871, Rossetti had begun the canvas that six years later emerged as the best of his whole Jane Burden (later Morris) series, the brooding Proserpine, bride of Pluto.[62] The history of this picture is somewhat interesting since Rossetti painted seven versions of Proserpine, ever painting and repainting. In the sombre foreground of the 1877 version, Rossetti pictures a woman with cascading hair as black as coal and eyes which seem to look back to the bereft world of reality. There is remarkable contrast of light and dark tones in the work. This same mood of light and dark and sorrow is present in the sentimental lines of Rossetti's sonnet written for the picture. There, too, Proserpine stands, a prisoner in her Tartarean palace, cold and grey, pondering her plight as one far away from:

> ...the light that brings cold cheer
> Unto this wall,--one instant and no more
> Admitted at my distant palace-door.

Afar, too, she moans, are "the flowers of Enna" from the fatal fruit

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61 Op. cit., p. 211.
62 Ibid., p. 195.

held in my hand, which, "tasted once, must thrall me here." "And afar, how far away" are the skies of blue and nights of men.

The picture alone is suggestive. There is mystery about the face itself that makes the painting a "wonderful piece of work."[63] But it alone could not interpret the particular thought in Rossetti's mind that he is able to express in the sonnet. There this facial aspect is explained as Rossetti flings open the door of Proserpine's mind and puts her thoughts into the the words:

> Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing
> Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign:
> And still some heart unto some soul doth pine,
> (Whose sounds mine inner sense is fain to bring,
> Continually together murmuring,)--
> 'Woe's me for thee, unhappy Proserpine!

Thus, as the sonnet's octave makes clear the distinction between the light and dark symbolism of the picture, so does the sestet explain Proserpine's suspended, receptive attitude as a straining for telepathic union with another soul, somewhere wailing its separation from an "unhappy Proserpine."

Succeeding this successful series was Rossetti's well-known poem-picture duet, The Blessed Damozel, which serves as the summation of all that was gained by his union of art and poetry. Oddly enough, the incidents behind the development of this companion poem and painting heighten its interest. In the first issue of The Germ in 1850 appeared Rossetti's poem, "The Blessed Damozel," the opening lines of which, according to Robert Buchanan in his later attack on Rossetti, "The Fleshly School of Poetry," were "a careful sketch for a picture, which worked into actual color by a master, might have been worth seeing."[64] In 1879, however,

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63Hueffer, op. cit., p. 176.
64Welland, op. cit., p. 181.

appeared an oil painting,* Rossetti's third attempt at painting a companion picture for the poem, which showed that he did not deserve the above criticism. There, he has caught the poetic damozel as she leans "out from the gold bar of heaven" with "three lilies in her hand" and "stars in her hair seven." Buchanan's criticism did not include the poem, for he called it Rossetti's one "nearest approach to the perfect whole as a poem--an apotheosis of love actually lost by the writer."[65] Rossetti himself designed the poem as a complement to Poe's "The Raven." "I saw," Rossetti said, "that Poe had done the utmost possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven."[66] And his poem remains a sympathetic achievement of this aim, its sweet, musical lines advancing and embodying the mystical passion of the damozel, lamenting the absence of her lover:

> 'I wish that he were come to me,
> For he will come,' she said.
> 'Have I not prayed in heaven?--on earth,
> Lord, Lord, has he not prayed?
> Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
> And shall I feel afraid?'

Later, projecting her imagination to the actual moment of his coming, she tells how they will stand together before the shrine of God, how she will lead him to God "round whom all souls kneel" to petition:

> Only to live as once on earth
> With Love, only to be,
> As then awhile, forever now,
> Together, I and he.

The poem itself is one of Rossetti's best and a credit to both his talents. It combines a poetic mood of impatient longing and artistic, sensible imagery. The painter's habit of visualizing details is found in

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65Ibid.

66Anderson and others, The Literature of England, p. 990.

*Refer to prints, p. IV.

the exact numbers of lilies and stars and in the description of the damozel's robe and her hair, "yellow like ripe corn." Showing this same concrete quality is the religious imagery and Rossetti's very real picture of a Paradise with streams and groves.

The picture, too, is particularly "Rossettish." The damozel's pose is that of a woman with head thrown forward, hair falling in profusion on the shoulders, and eyes, wide, transfixed, charged with emotional intensity--principally the same as in the Proserpine and Beata Beatrix paintings. Thus, together, Rossetti's poem and picture express, to a great extent, his actual temperament while engendering sympathy for the damozel and her earthly lover en retard.

In these eight painting-and-poem pairs has been seen Rossetti's attempt to combine two media--the magic aim of the Pre-Raphaelites. A final question, then, is necessary. Had Rossetti as leader and exponent of the movement's aim and apirit, really succeeded in achieving what his Pre-Raphaelite temperament sought?

As concerns his aim as a creator, Rossetti had idealized woman, the woman of his dreams. The Beata Beatrix and Proserpine are evidences of this. As concerns his larger aim of combining art and poetry, Rossetti had achieved greater success than any other member of the movement by virtue of his imaginative genius and dual talent. The painter's love for exactness of detail as in the "Damozel" poem and the writer's imaginative quality of situation as in the Lady Lilith canvas illustrate the extent to which he was able to transfer to one medium the means of expression used in another. And the companion poem and picture, Found, likewise reveal the extent to which he could express in two media a single theme, mood, or sentiment. There are, too, a great many instances when

his single theme seems forced, his poems becoming merely pendants wherein to make clear the literary and symbolic suggestiveness of his paintings. Yet, there are instances when the union reaches the harmonious note of the poem and picture of Astarte Syriaca, or achieves enlargement of idea as in the pair, "Body's Beauty" and Lady Lilith. It is in such cases that Rossetti's true gift displays itself.

Because Rossetti's aim depended upon his dual talent for success, recent critics have attempted to judge his merit as either poet or painter. Perhaps their opinions are best summed up in a quotation found in most accounts of Rossetti's life and works: "Rossetti was honored among painters as a painter and among poets as a poet. Yet he was an amateur who failed in two arts."[67] Since the validity of this statement must be left to posterity, the important thing is not to condemn Rossetti's failure to master the theory of either art, but to recognize his boldness in attempting to unite them, to relate them, to paint with words and to sing with paint. This in essence is the Pre-Raphaelite spirit. This in essence is the merit of its leader and exponent.

Over the period of time from the appearance of the folio to that of Rossetti's Blessed Damozel, the Pre-Raphaelite spirit had forsaken its initial enthusiasm for truth and sincerity in art, undergone a transformation, battled the Academy; yet by the 1880's, from all appearances, failed in the attempt to revitalize art. For one thing, Pre-Raphaelite paintings rarely hung in the Academy's halls, except for Millais's. Rossetti had in disillusion withdrawn from the world to suffer alone the harsh attacks branding his works as sensual and fleshly--a profanation of art. With Hunt, Millais, and Morris, he was likewise done; and Burne-Jones he did not care to see. All these disappointments were, in a sense,

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67Willand, op. cit., p. 15.

omens of an ending near at hand. The death of Rossetti in 1882 thus brought the Pre-Raphaelite group together for the last time to mourn his passing.

But even as the individual members passed away, there was left behind in the work of Rossetti and his colleagues their spirit, romantic and reactionary, and their aim, bold and imaginative. The important closing for the Pre-Raphaelite story, therefore, is not to lament their apparent failure, but to recognize in their movement the birth of a new current of thought, a new energy directed toward an integration of the arts. Indeed, theirs was a rebel spirit!

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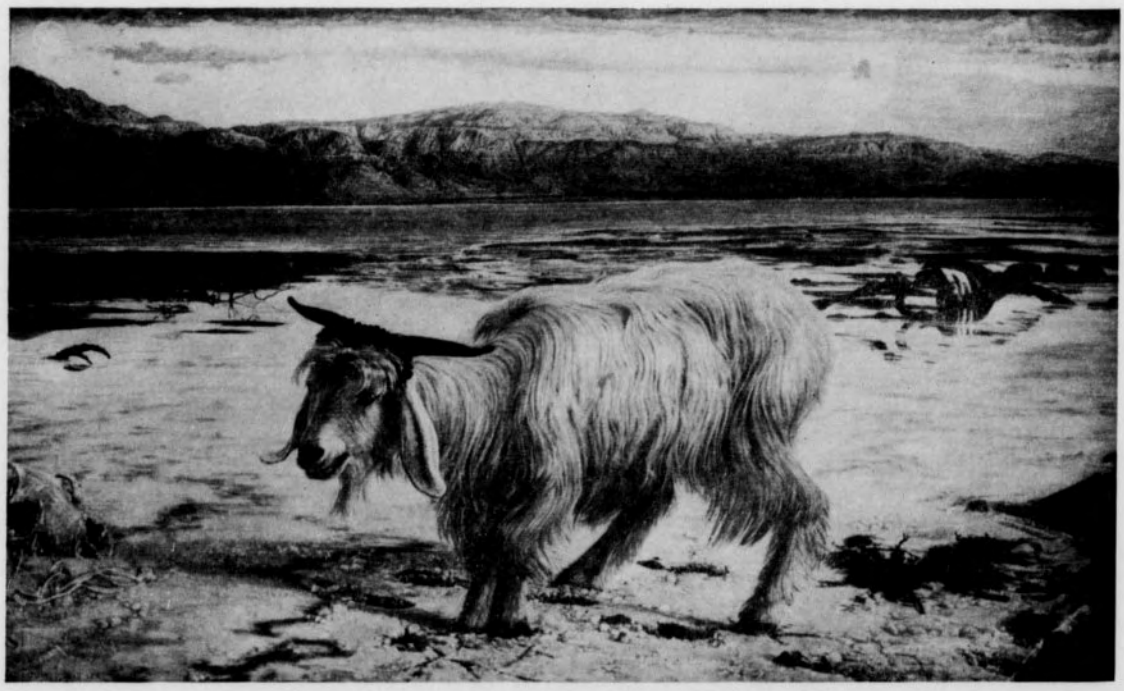
* Contain prints of all paintings mentioned or referred to in text of paper

Prints



THE SCAPEGOAT
Private Collection

THE UNIVERSITY PRINTS
BOSTON

HOLMAN HUNT. 1827—1910

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THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD
Keble College, Oxford

THE UNIVERSITY PRINTS
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HOLMAN HUNT. 1827—1910

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD
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HOLMAN HUNT. 1827—1910

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THE ANNUNCIATION
National Gallery, London

THE UNIVERSITY PRINTS
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ROSSETTI
1828-1882

F 128

BEATA BEATRIX
Tate Gallery, London

THE UNIVERSITY PRINTS
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ROSSETTI. 1828—1882

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BEATA BEATRIX
Tate Gallery, London

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ROSSETTI. 1828—1882

THE PERRY PICTURES. 929.
BOSTON EDITION.

FROM PAINTING BY ROSSETTI. 1828-1882.

THE BLESSED DAMOZEL.

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